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What Can Be Accomplished Through Good Social Work in the Field of Illegitimacy?

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IT is time to ask ourselves the question in our title and imperative that we try to answer it. For a vast amount of thought and service is being expended by an almost innumerable group of people working in the field of illegitimacy—a field which has become very inclusive during the past ten years. Our reactions run a wide gamut as we survey accomplishments in work with and for unmarried parents. They range from the emotional exhalation of the non-critical worker who is concerned only with temporary superficial responses, to the questioning and despair of the thoughtful and highly trained worker who reads into her tasks every pessimistic implication. Human nature at times becomes too much for her and she sees failure as a constant accompaniment to her work. It is the latter type of worker, however, who has the most to teach us—and it is not, on the whole, a discouraging lesson.

The question raised brings interesting responses when put to such trained workers. One of wide experience feels that social work with unmarried mothers is, on the whole, a fruitless and expensive task—save in so far as the children of the mothers are assured protection from bad care and neglect. She also feels that the expense involved in good case work with any large number of unmarried mothers is justified only as a research measure with the view to pointing the way to checks and controls over the causes back of illegitimacy. Another worker who has had many contacts with unmarried parents feels that the results of her efforts as shown in their better conduct, happy

homes, etc., are so gratifying as fully to justify the expenditure of time and money. Still another social worker has observed the difficulty of maintaining long and continuous contacts with very many unmarried parents, because the experiences which have brought them to the attention of the social worker are such that the parents want to shut out the light of publicity at the earliest possible moment.

Our services to unmarried parents consist of certain direct personal services and certain indirect impersonal mass services, the latter group including many of the educational and preventive measures which look to an actual control over and prevention of illegitimacy so far as this is possible.

BASIC ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM

We must keep clearly in mind some aspects of the problem before us: namely, the basic desire of human beings for sexual experience; the involved and ramifying nature of the sex instincts; the element of constant uncertainty that is so large a part of these instincts; the fact that nature is far more powerful as it works upon any given number of men and women than are these same men and women in any individual, deliberate and thoughtful control they may be able to exercise over their own actions. Sex experimentation, whether in practice or in theory, will necessarily and inevitably accompany the development of every generation. When we add to this constant element within all human beings, the disadvantageous social elements that make up the lives of such a large

portion of our population, we can see that the problem becomes more rather than less complicated. It should further help in our understanding to realize that so far as we know, illegitimacy is one problem with which every group in the past has wrestled unsuccessfully—if elimination is the measure of success.

There have always been those who give birth to children in the face of conventional strictures and unless society perfects and sanctions measures of complete birth control, a step which is highly improbable, these unconventional births will continue to be factors in social life. The process is quite beyond our complete control. Moreover, illegitimate sexual experiences void of the probability of parenthood are more dangerous socially than where the relationship ends in parenthood.

HIGHER STANDARDS IN CASE WORK FOR UNMARRIED PARENTS

But let us see wherein we can make some progress. We can raise the general standard of our social case work, which, taking into account all the agencies doing unmarried mother work, is very low. Careful social diagnosis as a matter of general procedure is unknown to many of the workers in these agencies or, if known, is considered undesirable or impossible of attainment. The Federal Children's Bureau's study of illegitimacy in Boston shows how great is the need for more light, and that this light can come only through a knowledge of the personal histories of many mothers, gained in actual thoroughgoing social case work contacts. We can strive for such a standard that generally over the country no one will be placed in a position of power or responsibility in a society or institution doing work for unmarried mothers, who is not a trained social case worker. We can strive to make the whole process

involved in the separation of a child from its unmarried mother—if such is to take place—a matter for the most careful and sympathetic study and action. We can do much to remove it from the field of emotional action in which it so largely rests at the present time.

LESS HURRIED ADOPTIONS

We can insure that adoptions will never be entered upon hurriedly; that the mothers will have every chance to weigh and review their own decisions, or, what is often quite as important, the decisions of others, involving a permanent separation from their children. We can also insure the passage of sufficient time between the decision to separate and the signing of final papers by the adopting parents. If we submit sufficient evidence as to what happens when these simple checks are neglected we may expect to affect the thoughtless and unconsidered actions of most of our courts in adoption proceedings.

COMPLETE VITAL STATISTICS

The indifference of so many states and communities to the question of adequate birth registration should be one of our first points of attack. Accurate and well-nigh complete birth registration is a matter of routine procedure in most European countries. We can make it so in this country. It is a fundamental part of any child welfare program, especially where the children of unmarried parents are involved.

As it is now, a very large number of children of such parents are never officially born. This is true in a lesser degree of legitimate children. But the neglect on this score in the case of children of unmarried parents makes the continuance of criminally negligent care hard to combat. Every good, social work program for babies necessitates complete birth registration.

ELIMINATION OF THE PROFITEERING AGENCY

We can eliminate the profiteering agency. Some of the worst and most persistent offenders in the heartless job of playing on the fears of unmarried parents and bartering in their babies, are institutions and maternity homes under church control. We can eliminate the mercenary child-placing societies whose work is largely that of "baby snatchers" and who finance themselves through payments not only from the parents but from the adopting parents as well. There is no more disgraceful situation in social work than the easy and continued existence of these types of money-making pseudo-social agencies.

We can insure that every agency receiving babies of illegitimate birth shall give them good care, so that it will be a gateway to life and not to heaven. The mortality rates of a great many societies and institutions caring for these babies have been and are appallingly high. The application of good social case work will prevent this.

Where foster care is felt to be necessary, we can apply good home-finding methods to the task and thereby eliminate the bad homes. We can keep reasonably full records of both history and treatment. We can make it a general fact that social work with unmarried parents shall be restricted to licensed and properly supervised agencies, and that all families taking unrelated babies be licensed and supervised.

INTERSTATE STANDARDS

We can insure that the agencies in each state shall not try to impose on the agencies in other states by unnecessary and unstandardized interstate placements. There should be minimum requirements for all such placements, the

outstanding points of which will be that the babies have been separated from their parents only after due thought and that, so far as can be ascertained, they are physically and mentally well. It is certainly not the task of organizations engaged in this special field to find babies for all the childless couples in the United States. Own children for own parents, is a good motto to follow. Some of us become almost hysterical if we fail to register each day, one child taken from its own mother and placed in the arms of an adopting foster mother.

HEALTH SAFEGUARDS

We can see to it that all that has been said about the supreme importance of good health to the child in his early years, especially the first four or five years, is made a fact. The Federal Children's Bureau's Boston study mentioned above shows how great are the physical handicaps from which illegitimate babies suffer. Every trained social worker knows that numerous so-called social agencies are responsible for the imposition of a great many of these handicaps in hundreds of communities. The best in medical care should be given to these babies and, difficult as this task will be, it can be done.

We should do a great deal for the parents in regard to physical examinations and also medical care, when the latter is needed. Certainly there should be the greatest accuracy and thoroughness in examinations for venereal diseases and in their treatment. The importance of such care will make it necessary for an extension of work on the part of the larger centers of population in any given state so as to provide special services for mothers whose own homes are in the less populated and more rural districts. The long time follow-up work needed where

syphilis or gonorrhea is present is a health task that we simply cannot ignore. Testing for the presence of these diseases should be a routine matter in each case.

The development of good case standards by hospital social service departments will make possible their doing a very fundamental health work, which is now in many instances going by default. In this connection, it should be observed constantly that social case work in all of its phases, in social service departments and elsewhere, suffers considerably because practically the whole job is now being done by women. The lack of men case work practitioners must be met, if at all possible.

CONTROL OF FEEBLE-MINDED GIRLS

The factor of feeble-mindedness in mothers in relation to illegitimacy is something against which we can contend with increasing success. It is a fight that will lead to the discovery of mentally defective girls before pregnancies result. No social case work phase of the illegitimacy situation in any community will yield more immediate results along preventive lines than the early and accurate diagnosis of the mentally unfit and, particularly, the socially unfit within this group, and the securing of their proper care. The problem of the feeble-minded unmarried father is very negative. He possesses no courting abilities; his earning power is low; he cannot treat and entertain or pay for entertainment—hence he is left very largely out of the running. If we can protect the uncontrolled feeble-minded girls and women, we shall have won one of our hardest fights. Good social case work will be needed to orient and define just how far it is safe to permit community life for certain types of feeble-minded females. A whole series of case studies

of women in these groups must be made to bring out under what conditions and under what pseudo probation restraints illegitimate parenthood, at least, may be avoided.

SOCIAL WORK IN THE SCHOOLS

We now come to a group of mass or indirect services which many social workers feel will have a more lastingly preventive effect on illegitimacy than all the other forces and activities named. Social case work must be applied in the public schools from the very early grades if we are to grow a race of adults that will approach sex matters with a trained and educated point of view. As has been pointed out by leading school men, the public schools bring large masses of children together in hitherto unknown ways and release interests and desires which have the sweeping power of a flood. Adolescents have always, to a certain extent, experimented with their sexual functions. The massing of thousands of adolescents with no special machinery for their proper social diversion simply increases the number of experiments. That there are such experiences is a matter not for surprise or priggish horror but for calm and thoughtful study.

We are beginning to get light on the sex lives of so-called normal men and women. To a very surprising extent, thoroughly reputable adults reveal that in their adolescent years they indulged in sex relations—often out of curiosity and, in general, with no permanent ill effects. They lacked adult instruction, guidance and understanding, and sought the nearer and more easily understood statements of their own age groups. Just so long as the co-educational high schools offer few protections and few opportunities for calm and wise treatment and understanding of the irrepressible sex inter-

ests of growing children, just so long will a considerable stream of illegitimacy flow from these same schools. According to the statement of those who know, it is already quite large.

Social case work in the public schools is one of the most productive and far-reaching opportunities before social workers. It is certainly not the socially pathological task which best describes most of the work that has to be done by agencies working with unmarried mothers. Work in the public schools will surely result in the early draining off and diagnosing of the serious conduct cases—the mental cases and the social misfits.

We can do much in the field of recreation, the full social effects of which most of us misunderstand. Social work applied to recreation will not mean the paternalistic control over individuals which we seem sometimes to advise, but it will be an adequate and proper supervision of the forces of recreation by public authorities. It is useless for us to permit the existence and operation of recreational centers which by suggestion and open acts invite the breakdown, on the part of the individual, of wise and necessary social control. On a purely case work basis, we can prove that the conducting and supervision of recreational activities is a public and not a private task. We can also prove that the element of private profit in the field of recreation makes for the existence of many special evils which are found so frequently in illegitimacy problems. Recreation is as much a public function as is education.

POSSIBILITIES IN INDUSTRY

Social case work as applied to industry will make increasingly clear the relationship between fatigue and sex delinquencies; between types of industries which are bad social risks and the

wreckage thus caused; between sex hygiene in the industry and industrial efficiency. From many stories gathered from many unmarried mothers, industry takes little responsibility for preventing the existence and the continuance of destructive social forces within the job or office, which finally bring a girl to her social ruin. Little thought is now given to supervision in this field but as industry broadens itself, by social case work contacts through employment managers and directors of personnel increasing opportunities will be offered for making clear a social responsibility resting upon the employer, which, if carried out, will result in a very definite decrease in certain types of illegitimacy.

POSSIBLE GAINS THROUGH SEX EDUCATION

Social case work as applied to the field of sex education has limitless possibilities. We have only begun to see wherein a wholesome knowledge of sex, beginning with the very early years of childhood and continuing all through life, will tend to supply fit substitutes for much that is unwholesome and dangerously experimental and which is so very common in the life of today. One looks almost in vain through the histories of unmarried mothers for evidences of wholesome and normal sex understandings. An almost inevitable factor in each case is a degree of ignorance about life and reproduction and the significance of the love element in life, which can be removed and will be removed if only the right forces are brought together.

As we project further studies into the field of child welfare, we shall come to see with increasing clearness the dangers involved in the mass care of dependent and delinquent children. We can now see with accuracy how great is the damage being done today

through the foster care being given by institutions and placing-out societies to many thousands of children scattered all over the country. From the best of evidences obtained through careful case studies by good agencies, the total damage must be very great. Some day more of us will come to see that the mass care of girls having histories of sex delinquencies should be a last, rather than a first plan of action. For one cannot devise a more dangerous remedy for a girl so handicapped than an introduction to a large group of girls practically all of whom have had the same sort of experience.

IMPROVED LEGAL PROCEDURE

We can affect the legal procedure with reference to illegitimacy cases so as greatly to minimize its destructive effect upon the mothers who must come under it. Social case work within the courts will help to supply the elements of sympathy, imagination and understanding, the absence of which makes many courts serious anti-social agencies from the standpoint of a good illegitimacy program. Greater privacy can be assured and the influence of women judges and social workers can be felt more continuously in the sessions of the court. Certainly in the estimation of many thoughtful social workers, the present general judicial procedure creates rather than dispels difficulties in the work of social treatment, and likewise has very serious effects on the mental life of many mothers. Furthermore, as social case work tends to socialize the methods of the court it will likewise tend to affect the means that must be followed not only in getting orders for support on the fathers, but in seeing that adequate orders are made and that their collection does not result in such a large burden of non-payments and irregular payments to be borne by the mothers.

The financial risks should be assumed by the community in which the court sits.

We are prone to set before ourselves social case work standards which can scarcely ever be realized. It will be of value to any one of us to record, as the Boston Conference on Illegitimacy has done, the total social and financial costs involved in the treatment of one case of illegitimacy and then to multiply this by thousands in order that we may get the full picture of what a reasonably well done case work job for all mothers in a given community would involve. It likewise will pay us to review the results achieved in a group of fifty carefully studied and supervised unmarried mothers, let us say, in order that we may get a proper set of values and a proper perspective on the various tasks that have to be performed.

It is my opinion, after careful deliberation, that, on the whole, the more thoroughly we do social case work for unmarried mothers, the more truly will we be forced to work back step by step to the causes of illegitimacy and to the control or elimination of a great many of these causes. It is a fact that work for unmarried mothers involves the attempt at an unpleasant and irksome control over individuals (largely adults—at least in their experiences), such control being permitted for the time being simply because of the specific social handicap under which the mother is laboring. Much that we try to work out through our social case work supervision, involves mental and social readjustments that few individuals are capable of making. Herein lies one of the great obstacles and difficulties in work with unmarried mothers. We arrive, in all but a few problems, at a period in the mother's life which does not permit our affecting her actions, her thoughts and her daily processes to any very great extent.

What she is, she will be. It would, therefore, seem to be true that the more thoroughly we do our social case work, the more we are going to break away from repressive personal controls and get out into the broader fields that lie in education, health, recreation and proper training of children during early years.

We speak of long continued supervision as a necessary accompaniment of good social case work. Each social worker knows from actual experience, however, that with new work coming on day by day we do not possess the workers or the funds to give this suggested type of supervision to more than an infinitesimal number of mothers.

Moreover, as we study our social case work material through periods sufficiently long, we shall see that, if the mothers are of normal mentalities the major part of the burden of readjustment rests on their shoulders. Social case work, therefore, applied to the field of illegitimacy is going to supply that fund of information the lack of which we are only beginning to sense. Knowledge here will surely mean power—power that will lead us to a more economical use of resources and equipment so that by careful work with all growing children we may prepare more of them for the opportunities and privileges of a deliberate and responsible parenthood.

The Development of Social Work for Child Protection

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THE field of social work for children is extensive and complex. Perhaps no other has as many ramifications that cross over into other fields. In no other, have more specialties been developed.

In spite of the varieties of services which are included in this field, the various divisions have on the whole had a steady and untroubled course of development. Institutional care of children, child-placing, juvenile probation and infant welfare have all come into public recognition, have found each its province in relation to the rest and have developed coöperative relations with the other social agencies with which they came in active contact, all with little friction, controversy or discussion. The newer arrivals in the children's field, such as the visiting teacher, the vocational guide and the child-health visitor seem to find an appreciative clientèle and are establishing

their permanent relationships without difficulty.

The child protection movement alone of all the specialties, seems to be a field full of divisive controversy. The nature of its work is so vital to the maintenance of the family tie that the agencies of the movement have had to shape definite, consistent and well thought out policies and to defend them vigorously. When the child is unable to get the proper protection in its own home, children's protective agencies have not hesitated to ask the courts as a last resort to cut the family tie. This course is so abhorrent to certain people who do not realize the menace that a brutal parent or an immoral home may prove both to the child and to the welfare of the community, that it often becomes the subject of bitter legal and public controversy.

Not only have children's protective societies felt the effects of controversy